

Getting Rations: A Continuing Struggle

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Grit, perseverance and determination in a single woman become the catalyst for change in a tiny village in Bihar. The training conducted by PRADAN helps raise awareness of the villagers' rights and entitlements. Women take the lead in seeking and demanding justice for themselves

"Hum log bahut door jangal taraf se aate hain aur aanae-jaane ka koi sadhan nahi hai. Aapko hum logon ka baat aaj hi sunna padega (We come from far off, from near the forest and there is no transportation. You have to listen to us today)," said Chhotaki Hembrom.

In January 2015, Chhotaki, along with other Santhal tribal women from Naudiha *panchayat*, went to complain about the irregularities in the Public Delivery System (PDS) to the Marketing Inspector (people call him MO). The women wait till the MO finishes his work. He listens to their plea and checks the records of their dealer. He tells the astonished women that the records showed that they were receiving food grains and kerosene regularly. Chhotaki tells him that they do not receive the rations regularly and the other women nod in agreement. They tell the MO, *"Hum logon ka faisla aapko hi karna padega. Kripa karke aap hum logon ke gaon aayiye* (You have to solve our problem. Please come to our village)." The MO promised them that he would visit their village.

A month passed; the MO didn't visit them and the dealer continued with his exploits. The women met the MO again; this time gave him a written application, and insisted he visit their village. The next day, the MO came to the PDS shop. More than 100 women from the *gram panchayat*-level Federation (GPLF) gathered at the shop. Chhotaki led the crowd. Soon, a heated argument began between the women and the dealer.

The women said, *"Tum hum log ka ration chori karke bech dete ho. Hum log padhe-likhe nahin hain to jahan-tahan angutha lagwa lete ho. Hum logon ko marke tum sukhi nahi rahoge* (You steal our ration and sell it to others. Because we are illiterate, you take our thumb impression wherever you want. You cannot live happily by killing us)."

The dealer became very agitated and started abusing the women. Chhotaki controlled the situation. Hearing this, the MO said, "*Hum khud khada ho kar anaj aur tel aap logon ko batwaenge* (I will stand here myself to distribute the food grains and kerosene)."

This is the story of Chhotaki Hembrom. She is a short, slightly plump, lady. Whenever she speaks, a little smile appears on her face and wrinkles form on her forehead. Chhotaki is a 47 year-old Santhali tribal woman, who lives in the village of Naiyadih, Naudih *panchayat*, in the Chakai block of Bihar. Her husband, Lakhiram Murmu, died four years ago when he fell off a tree. Her elder son was 17 years old then. He gave up his studies and started working as a labourer. She has two more sons—Mukesh Murmu (now 17 years) and Rajendra Murmu (15 years and studying in Class V)—and a daughter, Savita Murmu, who is 12 years old and studies in Class III. Chhotaki spent her childhood at her parents' home in Lahariyatanr village, Giridih district, Jharkhand, which is 3 km from her marital village of Naiyadih.

Her father, Fagu Hembrom, had married again after her mother's death. Chhotaki had two sisters, who died soon after their marriages. Her father and stepmother do not have any children, so Chhotaki gets support from her parents in crucial situations.

After the death of her husband, Chhotaki did not get any support from her elder brother-in-law (*bhaisur*). He accused her of being too free and of 'wandering' around the village after her husband's death. She did not care about what he had to say and continued to work and look after her children. She hopes that her younger daughter and son are able to complete their

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studies without facing any financial constraints. In 2011, she joined the Dare Nari Mahila Mandal, mobilized by PRADAN as a joint project of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) and the Central Silk Board (CSB).

Initially, she joined the SHG for savings and credit so that she would not have to borrow money at a high rate of interest from a moneylender. She did not speak much at the meetings in the beginning; after several meetings and trainings, however, she understood the purpose and the importance of being in a collective and started participating in the discussions.

She says that, after the Membership Training in 2013, she learned the bigger purpose of being in a group. She learned the importance of mutual help and solidarity, of acquiring new knowledge and learning new skills, especially to enhance livelihoods. Through various awareness building training programmes on 'Right to Food' and 'MGNREGA', she began speaking up for her rights and entitlements; she understood that to get those rights, she had to raise her voice and for that it was important to work collectively.

In 2014, when PRADAN mobilized all the SHGs to form a collective at the *gram panchayat*-level in Naudih *panchayat*, Chhotaki *didi* was selected as the representative from her village to the GPLF, which was named 'Nouadih Gram Panchayat Federation'. The new Federation was mandated to work upon *panchayat*-level problems and issues of the community. At the GPLF level, depending upon the issue, there were a few committees that were formed—the Mahila Sangathan Sudhar Samity, the Ajeevika Samity and the Adhikar Samity.

Provision for Food Security

1. Every person belonging to a priority household shall be entitled to receive 5 kg of food grains per person, per month at subsidized prices from the state government, under the targeted PDS.

Provided the households covered under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana shall, to such extent as may be specified by the central government for each State in the said scheme, be entitled to 35 kg of food grains per household per month.

2. Eligible households shall be entitled to food grains under Section 3 at the subsidized price, not exceeding Rs 3 per kg for rice, Rs 2 per kg for wheat and Rs 1 per kg for coarse grains for a period of three years, from the date of commencement of this Act; and thereafter, at such price, as may be fixed by the central government, from time to time, not exceeding:
 - i. the minimum support price for wheat and coarse grains; and
 - ii. the derived minimum support price for rice, as the case may be.

The Adhikar Samity works on the rights and entitlements of the community. Chhotaki *didi* believed that her aspirations and motivations were in alignment with the social movement and she became a member. The members of the Adhikar Samity received training from PRADAN on various social security schemes. Depending on the needs of a particular area, PRADAN arranges for training on the 'Right to Food' and the 'Rozagar Guarantee Act'.

Chhotaki used the training in her day-to-day life. One day, in a conversation she said, *"Dekhiye, dada, din main 2.5 kilo chawal lagta hai. Us hisab se to saal ka 900 kilo chawal lag jayega na? Lekin hum log to 600 kilo hi uga paate hain. Tab baki kaa kahan se laayein (Dada, we use 2.5 kg of rice per day. Based on this, we consume 900 kg of rice in a year, but we grow only 600 kg of rice. Where should we get the rest of the rice from)?"*

She described 'how PDS is significant in her life'. In the *kharif* agriculture season, Chhotaki produces 600 kg of rice. The family consumption of rice is 75 kg in a month. So

they need 900 kg of rice for round-the-year food sufficiency. The rice produced in their fields lasts for only eight months; for the remaining four months, she either buys rice from the market or depends upon the PDS. For a six-member family, they should ideally get 30 kg of grain (rice and wheat) per month which lasts for only 10 days a month. She can receive 360 kg of rice from the PDS, which will meet her family's food needs for another four months.

After her training in the Adhikar Samity, she realized that her family was not getting the benefits from PDS as per the provisions. She approached the PDS dealer, Arjun Soren. He, however, rebuked her and refused to give her the grain or the kerosene.

She brought up this problem in the weekly meeting of her SHG. She said, *"Maine hisab lagaya ki mujhe kitna ration milna chahiye par jab main dealer se mili to usne mujhe bhaga diya. Kya karna chahiye (I have calculated the amount of grains that I should get from the PDS. When I asked the dealer, he didn't listen*

to me and shooed me away. What should be done now)?"

She asked the others to calculate their rations and whether they were getting rations as per their entitlements. Every one calculated and found that no one was getting rations, as per the stipulated entitlement. The women realized that everyone had the same problem. The dealer was exploiting them. They decided that all the members of the group would meet the dealer and demand the right quantity of grains and kerosene.

The next day, the group approached the dealer but he said, "*Hum nahi denge. Tum logon ko jo karna hai kar lo* (I will not give. You do whatever you want to do)."

The group decided that this incident needed to be shared with everyone and the topic should be on the agenda for the monthly meeting of the GPLF. Around 30 members were present in the next GPLF meeting. Chhotaki narrated the whole incident in the forum. She recounted how the dealer scolded them and how he challenged them. The *didis* representing the Ektara, Rangmatia, Govindpur and Jobardaha villages agreed with her and admitted that the dealer was treating them badly as well.

Chhotaki then said, "*Agar yeh sabhi logon ka dikkat hai, tab hum logon ko kuch karna chahiye* (If it's a problem of everyone, then we should act)."

Everyone realized that it was a common problem. From Naudih village, Mahadev Soren (a volunteer in the block-level Federation) suggested that if the dealer was saying that nobody could do anything in this matter, they would have to visit the block office and report

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this issue to the MO (PDS), because he was the key person, who could solve their problem.

Chhotaki offered, "*Main jaungi. Kaun mere saath chalega* (I will go. Who will come with me)?" Fifteen other members volunteered to meet the MO in the Block.

In the second week of December 2014, Chhotaki, along with the other women, went to the block

and persuaded the MO to visit their village. But the MO didn't come. Again (in January 2015, as mentioned earlier), they visited him with a written application and the MO came to their village. The dealer distributed the ration in front of MO. The dealer was told by the MO to be regular and that there should not be any further complaints regarding the distribution of ration. The MO came again the next month and had the ration distributed in his presence. After that, the families started getting their regular food grains and kerosene.

This success story spread in PRADAN and reached the working *panchayat* of Chakai via the block-level Federation. Due to Chhotaki's participation and contribution in GPLF, she was chosen as the 'Koshadhyksh' of the Jivan Marshal Mahila Sangh (a block-level Federation). On 2nd April 2015, Jivan Marshal Mahila Sangh decided to conduct an awareness campaign on PDS and ICDS.

In support of this, the Naudih GPLF organized an awareness camp on the rights-based schemes of ICDS and PDS on 18 May 2015. On the occasion, the MO applauded such a programme and initiative; he was pleased that such campaigning was happening in Chakai block. He talked about the PDS scheme and gave the villagers information about how the

families who had been left out could still enlist their names in the BPL list by contacting the Vikas Mitra.

The SHG women from the Naudih *panchayat* participated in the camp and some of them also shared their views on the current the condition of the *anganwadis* and PDS in their villages.

In August 2015, the MO was transferred and a new MO was posted. Once again, the dealer, Arjun Soren, reverted to his old practices. He would not distribute the food grains and kerosene as stipulated. Chhotaki again went to the dealer and argued with him and he again scolded her and refused to provide the food grains.

She responded in anger, *"Tumhare ghar se nahi maang rahen hain. Hum apna adhikar maang rahen hain* (We are not asking you to give grains from your house. We are asking for our rights)."

Once again, she reported the matter in the GPLF and added that the issue was not only about inadequate supply of food grains and kerosene but also that the dealer drank too much and misbehaved with the women when supplying food grains. On 29 November 2015, led by Chhotaki, some SHG members from Naiyadih and Ektara villages submitted a written complaint to the MO. But the new MO

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did not take any action against the dealer.

Chhotaki then spoke about it in the GPLF again. Some members said that if the dealer was continuing to behave like this, there was no point in pursuing the matter. Chhotaki *didid* said, however, that they should not leave the case and that they

should fight till the end. She, along with Sunita Soren of the same village, went to the block office and talked to the MO. He listened to them and told them that he would visit the dealer and look into the matter. After the MO's visit, the dealer once again started giving the correct amount of rations.

Chhotaki now says, *"Thoda khit-pit to abhi bhi karta hai, par ration de deta hai* (The dealer still troubles us, but he gives us regular rations)." For two years, Chhotaki and her fellow GPLF members have been fighting with the dealer for regular and correct supply of rations. The dealer, from time to time, goes back to his malpractices.

Chhotaki says, *"Hum chup nahin rahenge. Yeh ration ki ladai to chalti rahegi* (We will not keep quiet. This fight for rations will go on)".

Chhotaki's efforts have not been limited to the regularization of PDS; she has raised awareness in the community on other government schemes such as MGNREGA and ICDS, which directly affect their lives.